

VU Research Portal

Historical Context and the Information Age: the Diaspora of Holocaust Archives

Schutz, R.

published in
Revista Arhivelor
2013

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Schutz, R. (2013). Historical Context and the Information Age: the Diaspora of Holocaust Archives. *Revista Arhivelor*, 2010(2), 9-23. [1].
<http://www.arhivelenationale.ro/images/custom/image/serban/2013/RA%202%202010/02%20SUMMARY%20%202010.pdf>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Historical Context and the Information Age: the Diaspora of Holocaust Archives^{*}

Raymund Schütz

Keywords: *Holocaust Archives; Digital Archives*

Imagine the archive of the year 2151. It will be fundamentally different from the one we use today: there is no smell of old paper, no reading room, no grey-haired archivist, just servers linked to the cordless universe-wide-web. The information will be available to the users on their latest bio-digital computers which are integrated in their eyelids and linked to their brains. Let us suppose that a student of history, who lives in a peaceful colony on Mars, is interested in earth-history and wants to understand how the Holocaust could happen. When this question flashes through his mind, the computer immediately transmits a query to Boogle, the universal knowledge system. Of course Boogle almost instantaneously comes up with a number of suggestions: lots of movies like “Schindler’s List”, views of digitised books from the twentieth-century and a virtual tour of the “Anne Frank Museum” in Amsterdam, an exotic place. But our student wants to get to the core of things and selects something called ‘Holocaust digitised paper archives 1933-1945’. To him the idea of paper as a carrier of information is hard to grasp. His mind is adapted to receiving and interpreting information that is presented to him by Boogle via his eyelids, but not to reading information on paper. Reading is something from the dark ages of human evolution. Being quite bright, although his IQ of 220 is only just above the average, our student understands that if he really wants to understand what happened more than 200 years ago on earth, he will need to analyse the way people and organisations communicated in those days. It takes him a couple of hours to find information about the paper bureaucracy, typewriters, secretaries, index card-files, pencils, Typex, telephone lines and telex-machines. Viewing “Schindler’s List”, once he has overcome the problem that it’s not in 3D, gives him an idea of how all this worked.

Then, at last, he turns his mind again to the ‘digital paper archives’. He works through all the lists, the cards and other documents. And it is quite mind-boggling to him. Our poor student gets frustrated for the first time in his academic life. Yes, all these documents are available with all sorts of data, but there is no logic. Some documents seem to be copied many times. On many documents he perceives handwritten notes that he can hardly decipher. The meaning of stamps and abbreviations is unknown. For a second he even thinks that it all must have been a big hoax, but then in a bright flash he sees the problem. The files presented in the

^{*} The author would like to thank Megan Koreman, Peter Tammes and all those who reacted on the draft version of this article on academia.edu for their comments and editing suggestions.

cloud must be in disarray. Worse still, the most important ones are missing: the files that give information about the creation of these records and about the interrelations between the files. These missing paper files and records must have existed for the system to work, but for some strange reason they are not present. The poor earthlings must have forgotten to transfer the key-documents to the digital cloud. Suddenly our student feels the urge to see and feel the old paper, which would be an exciting experience in his interstellar life. He soon finds out that it is stored on earth. He travels through quantum space-time to a forgotten site on earth where all the paper originals are stored. And yes, he soon finds out that what is presented in Boogle is only a small part of the available information. After two years of classic, if not dark age, archival research he writes his e-book on Holocaust-history and is revered by all historians in the universe.

The student realised that he needed to investigate the origin of the paper-born digital records to be able to interpret the historical data they represented. He could see the records, but he wanted to **understand** them. That is not a technical problem, but a classical archival one. Virtually all digitising projects pay attention to digital sustainability. Files must be readable in the future so that the digital images of our valuable documents will not be lost. A long-term vision of digital sustainability usually mentions technical solutions to achieve this goal: open source software, upward compatibility of current systems, backward compatibility of future systems. As a consequence of this approach the long-term compatibility of our digital archives is now mainly seen as a technical problem. But apart from the technical side we need to be aware of the contextual history of those records, otherwise it will be impossible to interpret the digitally preserved historical documents. Can we understand their meaning without comprehensive context information or **metadata**? No. This is a fundamental question for historical research, but strangely enough this problem is put aside when it comes to digitising archives. This article investigates how this problem can be addressed and resolved in the future.

The concept of context in the information age

The digital age has fundamentally changed the balance of power between society and the archives, the traditional classic keepers of information¹. Millions of people have added personal context to social websites like Facebook and LinkedIn. They expect the same functionality and detail from on-line historical archives. The public interest in genealogy is huge and the desire for information about ancestors who were involved in past conflicts has grown accordingly. Public demand is met by municipal archives, state archives and private institutions by putting their historical records online². The success of such projects is usually measured in statistics: hits,

¹ Rudi Laermans and Pascal Gielen, *The archive of the digital an-archive*, "Image & Narrative" 17 (2007); http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/digital_archive/laermans_gielen.htm; viewed 21 September 2011.

² On the internet the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands is a monument dedicated to preserving the memory of all the men, women and children who were persecuted as Jews during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and did not survive the Holocaust:

visits and page-views and, inevitably, the ranking in Google search results. But do those statistics prove that the internet users actually got the information they wanted? No. Did they understand the meaning of the document on their screen? We can only guess. These questions are irrelevant for technicians, but very relevant for archivists.

As our archives become more technically sustainable and accessible, the user need for context will grow accordingly. This responsibility is closely linked to the classical role of the archivist as a keeper of and guide to historical records. It is the archivist's job to attain long-term **robust sustainability** with professional foresight. However, in the multi-disciplinary setting of present day record and file management, the input of the archivist is in many cases secondary to the impact of the technical IT-specialists and their jargon. Budgets are usually spent (or rather overspent) on developing and maintaining systems. The specialists design the systems, hopefully according to the specifications, while the archivists are responsible for the content. When the systems go down, all the responsibility rests on the shoulders of the technicians to make them run again. This also explains the shift of the power-balance to the technicians: they keep the systems running and are the captains of the ship, while the archivists are 'just' users.

Regarding the **content** of the systems IT-specialists and archivists have a fundamentally different approach to context. This significant difference is both theoretical and practical. The theoretical difference between both is in their understanding of the concept of context. Archivists have a static, if not to say narrow, view of the idea of context. This is a legacy from the days when they were the keepers of paper archives in large and slow-moving bureaucratic institutions and were the guards of administrative continuity. In their finding aids they usually limit themselves to the institution they are describing, focusing mainly on policy issues and their records. In the Netherlands this particular attitude has led to a lack of attention to individual administrative records. In the 1990's administrative records were selected for destruction, while policy records were retained³. Archivists 'solved' the problem of describing the details of the administrative context by simply destroying it, thereby undermining a substantial part of their own professional *raison d'être*. The National Archive in The Hague recruits technicians and management scientists, rather than archivists. On another level, the classic finding aids archivists produce until today are static and purely functional. Once written they are regarded as the *magnum opus* of their archivist authors and are seldom changed, possibly also as a result of a lack of time. However, in the digital age archives become more accessible for normal users and specialists. New insights will be gained and those should become part of the finding-aids and meta-data. The static concept of finding-

www.joodsmonument.nl. Separately, the memorial museum of camp Westerbork has created an elaborate victims-database "*Een naam en een gezicht*" ("a name and a face") which is available to visitors of the museum. Furthermore information can be found on several other private and official sites on the internet.

³ The Nationaal Archief in The Hague devised a system for retention scheduling called the PIVOT method. See website of the Nationaal Archief: <http://en.nationaalarchief.nl/appraisal-appreciation/opzet-selectielijsten-engelse-dummy/retention-scheduling-using-the>.

aids is a thing of the past. To bring the finding-aid to the **next level**, archivists need to cooperate with the technicians.

This leads us to the question: what is the position of archivists after the technical revolution of the information age? As professionals they should reconsider their organisational position and their approach to historical records management. Their professional scope in the digital age should be focused at keeping the historical records connected to their context in time. It is my view that the traditional role of the archivist should be reinvented, using the practical methods that information science has provided. In the new balance the archivist tradition and the world of technicians needs to be linked. To explore that possibility we have to take a closer look at the way the IT-world addresses the concept of context. Context is also hard to model for technicians, but they adopted a practical approach. When they look at a network they understand that every node in the system is a possible source of context for every other node of the system, and the system as a whole. When the Google-technicians add information about restaurants to Google Maps, they regard it as an extension of the context of the whole system. Every layer of connections enables the system to create new context. The computer scientists Dey and Abowd describe context as a dynamic structure of transactions:

“Context is any information that can be used to **interpret** the situation of entities (i. e. whether a person, place or object) that are considered relevant to the interaction between a user and an application, including the user and the application themselves. Context is typically the location, identity and state of people, groups and computational and physical objects.”⁴

Their practical and dynamic definition is also valid for historical records. Applications are in fact the digital counterparts of bureaucratic procedures. It is what I call the ‘network concept of context’ which is the basic-principle of a strategy to find ‘lost’ information in historical **paper** archives. This concept is especially applicable on Holocaust-archives.

Where does this take the archivist? The network principle of context can be applied to the analysis of the paper archives of bureaucracies. Context is a dynamic concept depending on time and place, depending on the questions that are raised by users of the archive. It involves transactions in a paper network that consists of individuals, groups and organisations that work according to procedures. Context inevitably leaves traces in the administrative records that were created. It will be time consuming to search for it on the micro-level, but it is there to be discovered. Lost information is partly recoverable: it was produced in a bureaucratic network and therefore has left its traces in different places. So it may have been lost in one place,

⁴ I have changed one word in the first sentence of this definition: ‘**interpret**’ instead of ‘characterise’. The definition is cited in *Definition and Implementation of Context Information*, *Proceedings of the 2nd workshop on positioning, navigation and communication (wpnc’05) & 1st ultra-wideband expert talk (uet05)* (ed. by M. Debes, A. Lewandowska, and J. Seitz); www.wpnc.net/fileadmin/WPNC05/Proceedings/Definition_and_Implementation_of_Context_Information.pdf.

but it can still be found somewhere else as a copy or in the form of reprocessed information. A scribble on one single record can explain the context of a batch of similar records. If we do not understand the digital image of a paper record, we must go back to the paper sources. To pinpoint in which archive we can expect to find context information, we have to reconstruct the paper network that created the document in question.

The backward paper perspective

Reconstructing the paper network, however, is not a simple task. The Holocaust – at least in Western Europe, was implemented using and usurping the existing bureaucratic systems, resulting in a scattering of archives and context information. The chaotic state of war-related archives was addressed soon after the war by the eminent Dutch historian Dolf Cohen, who at the time worked for RIOD in Amsterdam⁵. In 1951 he mentioned, among other reasons, the ‘sheer volume of present day, poorly organised archives and the lack of insight in the creation of those archives’. Even though the horrific events had happened recently, historians were struggling to recreate the context in which the records were created. This was the main reason why it turned out to be such a difficult task to edit and publish documentary source materials: the context of disorganised archives was lost. The great works of Dutch war historians like Jacques Presser and Lou de Jong were published almost twenty years after the war in the mid 1960’s. The disorganised state of war-archives contributed to that delay.

In the early days of historical research into the Second World War most work in the institutions that kept the war-records was dedicated to reorganising and selecting the available documents in an attempt to systematise their administration⁶. This reordering – quite contrary to the traditional archival **principle of respect des fonds** – took place in nearly all institutions and created a new contextual environment for these documents. Scientific institutions like RIOD acquired documents and reorganised their files of documents. Lou de Jong, who was commissioned to write his multi-volume History of the Netherlands in the Second World War, created his own huge card index. Other researchers also created their own sub-archives and (dis-)organised those as they pleased. In those days standardisation of information-management was an exotic concept.

But it was not only science that struggled with this huge pile of disorganised paperwork. Humanitarian organisations, which were under time-pressure to provide people with answers, developed their own systems to keep track of the huge number of personal records and files that were a result of their tracing-activities. The Information Bureau of the Netherlands Red Cross, that collected and processed victim-information, created a large card system (with approximately 900,000 entries)

⁵ The NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust en Genocide Studies in Amsterdam. It was established just after the war by the historian Louis de Jong, its name then being RIOD (*Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie*).

⁶ J. C. H. Blom, D. E. H. de Boer, H. F. Cohen and J. F. Cohen, *A.E. Cohen als geschiedschrijver van zijn tijd*, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 112.

as an index on the ever growing number of paper personal records. The ITS in Bad Arolsen also created a gigantic card index. The alphabetically and phonetically arranged Central Name Index contains over 50 million reference cards for over 17.5 million people and is the key to the documents and correspondence files⁷. Because of time-pressure, documents that did not contain information about individual victims were usually discarded by the humanitarian information collectors. To work efficiently, they were focused on personal data like names, birth-dates, incarceration-dates and death-dates. That single-mindedness led to a loss of contextual information, because accompanying letters which explained the origin of list were stored in another part of the archive and the connection was in many cases lost. Tracing was built around the names-index, the central system of information, and all the rest was considered to be less essential. As a consequence of this practical development, in most cases when we look at 'war' – or 'Holocaust' – related archives we are actually looking at systems that were reorganised after the war. Yes, these files incorporate records that were created during the war, but they were re-used and restructured in the new post-war administrative reality. **When we want to analyse the context in space and time that a record was created, we have to realise that we usually perceive the war-record through a post-war archival environment.**

Every restructuring of archival records inevitably leads to a distortion of the original state and loss of context. In fact digitisation is also a process of restructuring the original state and context of the archive. When we use a query to search a digitised card index we can only hope that the names have been indexed correctly and that every card is indeed digitally available. Typists and OCR-systems make errors and scanners sometimes skip cards. And on a much more fundamental level, usually only certain 'important' archives are digitised because of financial constraints. In practice digitisation is only **partial** preservation after a process of selection and retention where blind spots occur. As a result, the historical connection to the contextual environment is broken: the images are digital, but the paper context is still in boxes or, worse, is lost forever. Digitisation without a context-focused strategy leads to invalid and chaotic systems similar to the chaos immediately after the war. The challenge in the digital age is to prevent such a disastrous situation from happening again. Digitising the archives of tracing-organisations involves a considerable amount of research to reconstruct the contextual environment. If we do not take up that challenge, future users will be not be able to understand the documents on their screens.

Recreating the context of the Jewish Council Index Cards

The problem of scattering is not limited to the Jewish Council archives; it is also prevalent for the government archives. For example, historians investigating the link between registration and persecution usually point to the Netherlands, where a new system of population registration was introduced in the mid-1930's. The detailed individual personal records were used to produce population statistics. For every

⁷ See the website of ITS: www.its-arolsen.org.

citizen a paper record ('*persoonskaart*') was created on which all his or her personal details were registered. Whenever a citizen moved to another city, the personal record with the personal history followed like a shadow. For those times this was an advanced and efficient system. Its overambitious designer, the Dutch civil servant Jacob Lentz, remained in office during the occupation and also designed the identification card '*persoonsbewijs*' that was introduced in 1941. The administration system was used within the repressive context of German occupation and contributed to the efficiency of the German anti-Jewish measures in the Netherlands⁸. We would expect that the '*persoonskaart*' of a deported victim would be at one place, the archive of the last city of residence, and that it would contain all the information until the moment of deportation. This however is not the case. '*Persoonskaarten*' are to be found, as expected, in the archives of the city of last residence. But they are also in the archives of the Netherlands Red Cross, the archives of the municipality of Westerbork and in the archives of the Bureau Vestigingsregister of the municipal archives in The Hague, because, administratively, the deported were treated as émigrés⁹.

Figure 1. The Jewish Council Index Card of Lodewijk A. Houthakker. Since July 2, 1943 he was in the camp for the 'privileged' Barneveld. All the typed information was recorded

⁸ Götz Aly and Karl-Heinz Roth, *Nazi Census. Identification and control in the Third Reich*, Philadelphia, 2004, p. 66-68.

⁹ For a detailed description of the provenance of the bureaucratic network, see *Vermoedelijk op transport*, Leiden, 2010, my master-thesis written in Dutch which is available on Academia.edu, link: http://vu-nl.academia.edu/RaymundSch%C3%BCtz/Papers/607043/Vermoedelijk_op_transport.

by the Jewish council, as was the fountain-pen. All pencil grey and red is post-war (except the red B for Barneveld). Ballpoint-writing is post-war. The stamped red R(epresentative) is post-war (a representative was a survivor who could be approached for information about the camp). On September 29, 1943 Mr. Houthakker was taken from Barneveld to Westerbork (barrack 85). Then he was taken to the *Aussenkommando* Zeist. He escaped from there on September 21, 1944. Mr. Houthakker became a well-known art-dealer in Amsterdam. He died there in 2008.

Let me now illustrate my point about the Jewish Council archives. The index card file of the Jewish Council of Amsterdam is an essential part of the Information Bureau archives at the Netherlands Red Cross in The Hague. A large amount of personal and procedural information was recorded on these index cards by the staff of the Jewish Council during the occupation of the Netherlands. Nearly every Jewish person was registered individually on approximately 180,000 cards. Were all these cards created in a single administrative process? When we take a closer look at the system it is evident that the cards were created in several chronological phases and by different institutions¹⁰. First, we have the repressive context during the war, when the Jewish Council, or rather several subdivisions of it, created the cards. Second, after the war, the same card system was used by the Netherlands Red Cross as a basis for tracing the victims and determining their fates. The Red Cross added information to the wartime cards and added cards for people who did not already have one. The index file was reorganised: all cards were filed by name according to a phonetic lexicographic system. Remember, in those days the sacred principle of *Respect des fonds* was not a priority: the priority was to handle requests from people who needed to know what had happened to missing family-members.

It is important to note that the system went through several contextual lives. It started in a context of repression during the war, then it was transferred into an information system for humanitarian use, to find out what had happened to the victims. But these two chronological layers of creational context are only the beginning of the story. If we want to read the information on the cards and understand the meaning of the jottings, we have to try to recreate the administrative procedures that created these records. The paper card in itself is only the end product of a complicated chain of administrative events in a paper bureaucracy. When we try to interpret the data on the card, we are soon reaching the limit of our knowledge. The big question is: what happened to the context of these records?

The context of repression and persecution

It is important to realise that the Nazis were waging a war against the Jews. They made sure that the Jewish Council institutions could not operate adequately and efficiently. Jewish Council workers could be arrested and deported any minute of the day or night. As a result of the Nazis' repressive actions, the administrative procedures of the Jewish Council changed many times and, even worse, were scarcely documented. The Nazis used a secret language to disguise their aims which

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

affected all official correspondence and entries in card systems. The operational context was hidden and it changed continuously. The archives of the Jewish Council were partly destroyed and what was left of it after the war was scattered like gravel. The Nazi war against the Jews was secret and ferocious, the dynamics of which resulted in administrative discontinuity and scattered archives.

How can the archivist reconstruct the context of a system like the card index of the Jewish Council of Amsterdam? One approach is to recreate the paper network that existed when the card index was in operation. This consisted of the Jewish Council organisation itself but also of the nodes of the civil administration who registered the Jews in the first place. The civil administration in the Netherlands worked willingly together with the German repressive apparatus such as the *Zentralstelle für Jüdische Auswanderung* of the German police that coordinated the deportations from the Netherlands. In *Judendurchgangslager* Westerbork a special branch of the municipal office registered the Jews after they were taken into the camp. In the camp itself, a central card index system operated under control of the German camp commander, but staffed with Jews. In the late stages of the war the bureaucratic network of the civil administration and repressive apparatus collapsed. Very soon after the war several interested organisations competed to get hold of the records. In the Netherlands many administrative systems were involved, with the consequence that the relevant archives and their context-information are scattered. These scattered paper remnants illustrate the ‘meticulous functional division of labour’ that according to sociologist Zygmunt Baumann characterised the implementation of the Holocaust in Western-Europe¹¹.

¹¹ Zygmunt Baumann, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 98.

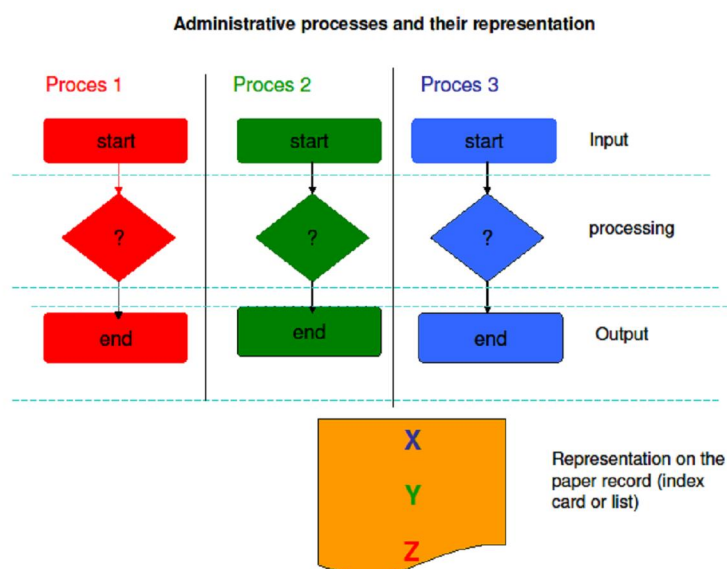


Figure 2. The information processing and output of a paper bureaucracy is illustrated here. Three separate processes produce recorded output. These processes can be simultaneous, but also successive. Each process has its own context. The result of each process is recorded on one paper card or list. If the records of the red, green and blue process are lost, it will be impossible to interpret the meaning of X, Y, and Z on the surviving paper record. The system can be seen as a paper records continuum. (the coloured figure is available in the online-version of this article)

The post-war paper context

The Information Bureau of the Red Cross and the Tracing Mission of the Ministry of Social Affairs were important nodes in the new bureaucratic network that evolved after the war. It amassed many (partly) surviving archives of prisons and concentration camps and tried to reconstruct the fate of the missing. The Information Bureau provided the Ministry of Justice with detailed information about individual missing cases. After this task was mostly completed in the early 1970's, the network became idle and the connections between the nodes were cut off. The paper records went into in the archives of the ministries, were partly destroyed and ended up in the National Archives. The Information Bureau of the Red Cross, however, remains in service today. To further complicate the situation, original documents relating to the administration of the Jewish Council can be found in the archives of NIOD in Amsterdam but **also** in archives of the Red Cross in The Hague. The records of the huge bureaucratic network of repression are spread over municipal, national and institutional archives, such as the offices of the Information Bureau of the Red Cross and at the National Archives. In consequence, the context-information of archive A could be in archive Z, and quite likely in a dusty cardboard box down in the back.

With the chronological levels of context in mind, three archival (topological) layers of context for the Jewish Council Card Index can be identified. The closest circle of context consists of the archives of the Information Bureau of the Red Cross, like deportation lists, personal files and other related collections such as the Westerbork files. The second circle consists of the external archives that contain context information and are scattered all over the Netherlands. They are at the NIOD in Amsterdam, the National Archives in the Hague and in many municipal and regional archives. But there is also a third, international circle of context: archives in Germany like ITS-Arolsen, where information is kept about prisoners of concentration camps and the archives of the Auschwitz Museum in Poland. The connection with Auschwitz goes back to the war period when the trains from Westerbork delivered the human load in Auschwitz, accompanied with the ‘packing lists’: deportation lists mentioning all the people in the trains. The connection with ITS is of a more recent date. Microfilmed copies of the Jewish Council Card Index were transferred by the Netherlands Red Cross to ITS-Arolsen in the 1980’s. ITS later provided copies to Yad Vashem. Although state-of-the-art at the time, these microfilms are black-and-white, while the originals were dotted with colours. The microfilms were adequate for the tracing purposes in those days, but if we want to interpret the detailed process-information on the cards, colour is an indispensable part of the context. However, the transfer from the original to the black-and-white copy meant that creational context was lost and this will inhibit the interpretation of these records. In other words: questions about these records cannot be answered because the contextual environment is not available.

As a consequence of the multi-processing origin of the records, we need to add descriptive information to these records, that is searchable, so the users will understand how to interpret the information our systems provide. A couple of years ago, the Canadian archivist Laura Millar suggested a redefinition of the concept of provenance and the distinction of three related components: creator history, records history and custodial history¹². Over time paper records can have many (co-)creators, reflecting their multi-layered, dynamical administrative environment. The history of records-keeping of war-records is complicated, as we have demonstrated here. This complexity should be explained by the metadata attached to the digital records and files. And, above all, the importance of reconstructing the provenance for these archives can hardly be overstated.

The digital age: ‘orphaned files’

The digital context contributes a fourth layer: file-sharing. Microfilms with records from other institutions like the Netherlands Red Cross have been digitised by ITS and made available to institutions like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem, but also the National Archives in Brussels and Institute of

¹² Laura Millar, *The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time*, “Archivalia” 53 (2002), p. 12-14.

National Remembrance, Warsaw (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*) have all a full copy of ITS documents (except correspondence files)¹³.

The intentions were and are surely laudable, but the digital files are, as were their microfilmed mother files, in fact ‘orphaned’. They have no metadata attached to them about their creation, history and interrelations with other archives. Information gathered using the originals within their context was lost in the process of microfilming and even more so in the subsequent process of digitising. They are ‘flat’ black-and-white images, sadly unconnected to their contextual history and environment. Professional researchers of the Holocaust will not be able to use the full potential of these files, because the connection with their contextual environment has been lost. This ‘Diaspora’ of microfilmed and digital archives has led to a lack of context in the new digital environment that was created. This is clearly not a sound basis for real digital sustainability.

‘Orphaned files’: decontextualization in time

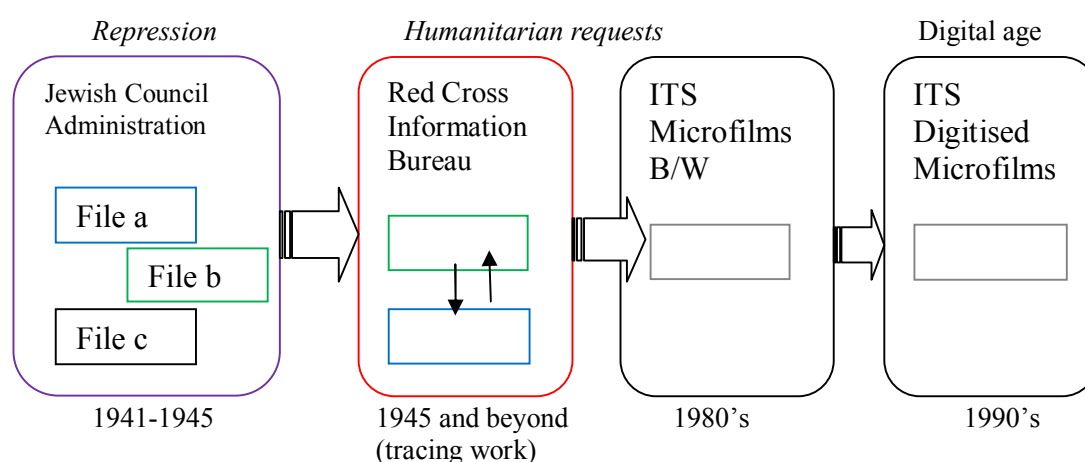


Figure 3. This illustrates the loss of context through time (custodial history): colours, representing context, become grey and the connections between files/archives are lost. The digital ITS copies are distributed as ‘orphaned files’ without context to other institutions in the world, which inevitably results in interpretation problems.

¹³ For a list of the institutions see the website of ITS-Arolsen: http://www.its-arolsen.org/en/service/links_and_addresses/other_international_institutions [viewed October 11, 2011].

A multidisciplinary approach

I have mentioned the responsibility of technicians and archivists, but there is another group of professionals who should be involved: the historians. The current general trend in European Holocaust research seems increasingly to be directed at the local level. In France and Poland new research zooms in on differences between the general implementation of persecution measures and what happened in specific towns and villages by combining the information in national and local archives with oral history¹⁴. This will increase the researchers' demand for context information. The more they zoom in, the more they will need to interpret the files and documents that they are finding. Furthermore, the connections with other archives will be important to provide additional context.

In the Netherlands, however, the research that is financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NOW) focuses on the aftermath of the war, such as the construction of memory, rather than on the war itself. Officially that chapter appears to be closed. It seems that all the questions have been answered. But is that really true? There is no doubt in my mind that this trend in the Netherlands will be and must be reversed. Historians, with the help of archivists and supported by technicians, will inevitably rediscover the war **itself**. The 'network concept' of archives and context will lead to new systematic questions and possible answers. As an inevitable consequence, Dutch professional historians will turn their research to the local implementation of the Holocaust and zoom in to the details. Sooner or later, the official historiography will follow suit and also enter the next level.

Conclusion: How to obtain robust digital sustainability

If we want to facilitate historical research we need to reconstruct the topology of the paper bureaucratic network to identify the data that were exchanged and processed. Only after we have established which organisations were involved will it be possible to pinpoint the archives where the historical records can be found, either physically or digitally. One must be aware that a large amount of records were destroyed during and after the war, some in accordance with the archival guidelines and some not¹⁵. So important parts of the context have been lost, but there is still a lot of information we can use, if we know how to find it. Finding context is a process that takes time. The classical finding aids should be able to change over time and incorporate the findings of researchers to recreate the contextual network. This means that finding aids should have a dynamic structure and should be able to absorb newly discovered information about the context.

To obtain robust digital sustainability, a detailed analysis of the interconnection of all these files is necessary. Ideally this analysis should be finalised before the digitisation, but that will not always be possible. The analysis aims to

¹⁴ I would like to thank Peter T. for attracting my attention to this fact.

¹⁵ It was not until the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust was adopted at the Holocaust Conference in the year 2000 that documents relating to the war and the Holocaust were protected from destruction. See website: <http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/about-the-itf/stockholm-declaration.html>; viewed 6 June 2011.

reconstruct the paper bureaucratic network (topology), and to identify the connected context-carriers. When finished, the analysis should become part of the attached metadata. Finding aids should be able to absorb new information about the network topology. Creating new dynamic systems is a job for the technicians, but the specifications of such systems should be the result of teamwork between archivists, historians and technicians. Otherwise, isolated digitisation of complex systems like the Jewish Council Records will lead to orphaned digital representations that cannot be fully interpreted.

Practically and financially it will not be possible to digitise every record until the last one. My point is that selection for digitisation should be based on contextual analysis. Those files (or individual records) that give meaning to other files should be digitised with priority. And if we analyse the provenance of micro-filmed archive, we may find that the original file has already been digitised somewhere else, and within its context.

We can fix our archives as digital pictures in time, but the context of the future users cannot be fixed: it will evolve continuously. Of course that is not just the case for Holocaust-related archives, but for all archives. What we take for granted now will not be self-evident for users in a hundred years from now. The new historian of the paperless information age will not routinely understand the way a paper bureaucracy worked. He will need context and it is our task as archivists to provide that. The historical archives of humanitarian organisations like tracing-bureaus are human-centred. Their organisation is fundamentally different from the archives of other bodies. The reconstruction of the context of these documents poses new challenges for archivists. It will take an effort, but the experience with the Information-bureau of the Netherlands Red Cross demonstrates that it can be done.

And if digitised archives are made public, the non-professional users will need comprehensive context information to understand and interpret the content of historical archives. The more digitally sustainable our archives become, the more flexible and dynamic our metadata systems should become. They are the connection between the past and the future and need to be revised continuously because the context of the present is endlessly evolving. The present-day archivist is standing on the edge of two worlds: a physical paper one and a virtual digital one. He should reinvent himself as a discoverer and keeper of context in the digital space-time. To put it bluntly, the management of archival institutions should put its money where its mouth is and facilitate the rediscovery and presentation of context. It is a monumental task, but many future students and quite a number of present historians will be very grateful if these archives achieve robust digital sustainability.